

## Drug gangs in Canada

### British Columbia or Colombia?

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#### Organised crime brings fear to Vancouver's streets

WHILE campaigning for an election on May 12th in which he was easily re-elected, Gordon Campbell, the premier of British Columbia (BC) province, had a personal brush with violent crime. As he was being interviewed by a reporter at a Vancouver hotel, a woman with a gun ran by, having robbed a jeweller. The premier's bodyguard hustled him to safety; the robber was later arrested. But the incident should have reminded Mr Campbell that crime worries voters almost as much as the recession.

Canada remains one of the world's safest countries but in recent years Vancouver, BC's largest city, has gained notoriety for gun crime, especially among drug gangs. Since 1997 nearly 450 gangsters have been killed there. The surge in shootings is "directly related" to a crackdown on gangs in Mexico and the United States, says Pat Fogarty, a senior officer in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Recent arrests by the three countries' police forces have disrupted a Mexican-run cocaine distribution chain, leaving Vancouver's street dealers fighting to secure their supplies. "The price goes up and the guns come out," says Mr Fogarty.

Vancouver has become a distribution hub in a global drugs trade stretching to Asia and Europe. Local gangs ship out cannabis, amphetamines and ecstasy made in BC, importing cocaine, heroin and guns for the Canadian market. Around 135 gangs are thought to be fighting over a business worth an estimated C\$7 billion (\$6.2 billion) a year.

That they do so in broad daylight demonstrates the feckless response of the provincial government and police, despite reports dating back more than 30 years giving warning of the growth in organised crime. Rob Gordon, a criminologist at Simon Fraser University, says attempts at creating an agency to curb the gangs have repeatedly failed. Two such agencies have been disbanded since 1998 because of conflicts among the various participating police forces. The current effort at collaboration, led by the Mounties, is also "riven with conflict", he says.

Despite great public concern over crime, it got little attention in the election. Mr Campbell's Liberals and the opposition New Democrats promised more police and prosecutors. But neither, says Mr Gordon, appeared to have a long-term strategy to control organised crime.

Despite some recent high-profile arrests of gangsters, Vancouver's local police admit they are not winning the war. They complain of having fewer officers per head of population than other big Canadian cities. The provincial government is planning a C\$20m cut in annual spending on police and the courts by 2012. The gangsters, by contrast, are well funded and have little trouble replacing those lost in shoot-outs.